

BOOK REVIEWS

Kathak Prasang

Ed. Rashmi Vajpeyi

Vani Prakashan, Delhi, 1992

192 pages, Rs 140

The editor of this book (in Hindi), Rashmi Vajpeyi, is herself a Kathak dancer; and in this collection of essays, she distinguishes herself as one who also cares for a comprehensive understanding of the dance.

Some of the essays included in the volume — the ones devoted to the lives and artistic attainments of some Kathak gurus — are delightful, and I would like to pick up one of these for special mention: Rohini Bhate's excellent piece on Lacchu Maharaj. Its snapshot style of writing at the start both permits and invites visualization — I could do this myself while reading the essay, for the maestro had grown very friendly with me since our first meeting at the Jaipur Kathak Seminar in 1969; and on the basis of this acquaintance I can vouch for the photographic accuracy of a good deal of what the author records by way of reminiscence. However, there is no mention in the article of the guru's remarkable capacity for ready repartee, and his readiness also to react positively to signs of genuine creativity in others' work. Further, for the word 'feel' (p. 103), 'अहसास' would have been a better substitute than 'अन्दाज़' which means idiom. But, on the whole, the essay is thoroughly enjoyable. It is insightful too. It is not for nothing that the following sentence occurs twice in the essay (pp. 101, 105):

धै-धै-धै। 'धै' नामक दो अक्षर स्थानों के बीच सब लघु-

कथक प्रसंग

विरोधश्री द्वारा
विचार और विश्लेषण



लक्षण कालों को समान लय से स्पर्श करते-करते गति
निभाने का अंदाज़।

धै is commonly regarded as one *bol*, but it comprises two *aksharas*; and what is noteworthy is that the flowing linkage of धै with ई, which also keeps the two letters apart and distinct, is to be duly brought out through *ang* as the even pace of *laya* itself. Such excellences of the essay set off the relative oddity of its language at places.

The most delightful individual detail of writing is, however, to be found in the essay on Pandit Shambhu Maharaj by the dancer and choreographer Maya Rao. It was well before 1948 that I first saw the

maestro's *abhinaya* at my uncle's Kaiserbagh residence in Lucknow, in the inspiring presence of Ustads Fayyaz Khan and Ahmed Jan Thirakwa; and I only join the essayist in her tributes to the guru's amazing versatility in bringing out the *arthabhava* of a single verse variously. I must also mention the very interesting second para on p. 107 where the author illustrates how the personal life-style of Shambhu Maharaj could be said to be a picture of contradictions. But what I enjoyed most was the essayist's description of how the guru would lapse back to the *sthayibhava* of a lame man (p.108)!

The two authors I have so far mentioned are both well-known dancers and teachers of Kathak; it is this variform equipment which (along with their *gurubhakti*) makes their writing truthful, sensitive and enjoyable. But of all the essays devoted to Kathak gurus, perhaps the most consistently thoughtful, comprehensive in concern, and yet quite intelligible piece is the one on Birju Maharaj by Keshav Kothari. It does not merely lavish encomia on the maestro but outlines what he is yet expected to do. It blends the sympathy of a *rasika* with the watchful concern of an administrator, and therefore deserves careful reading. (My own reading of the essay, however, was disturbed by the following on p. 127: कहरवा, 4 मात्रा; चाचर, 7 मात्रा). Of the many interesting points made in the essay, two have impressed me most: first, the author's emphasis on the need to reckon with the traditional language of Kathak (p. 128); and, second, his argument as to how this dance form may be credited with a distinctive resilience ('लचीलापन', pp. 129-30). I have already drawn attention to the value of Kathak discourse in my book *Swinging Syllables: Aesthetics of Kathak Dance* (Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1991). So here I may only explain how the concept of resilience, which Shri Kothari is the first to mention, is vitally relevant to Kathak.

Kothari interprets लचीलापन as the ability of Kathak to adapt itself suitably to

changes in the character of audience and venue. But I would like to look at it differently. A good Kathak dancer does not have to adhere to a pre-fixed plan: he is, in fact, free to vary the course of the *entire recital* in response to friendly 'challenges', say, from the Tabla accompanist, and to reactions from the audience as well, partly because the *lahra* serves all along as an anchor, and prevents waywardness. What is more, even in the process of dancing the same pattern an accomplished Kathak may shift the पदचप of a particular *bol* from its set location in the original order of the pattern, and then return accurately to the order in question, relishing at once the moment of designed deviation. This is the inbuilt resilience of Kathak, and this is what we partly mean when we speak of this dance as खुला नाच. I think it is essential to work out the relevance of this concept to Kathak dance systematically. It is today common in the West to speak of an art-work as living or organic form. But whereas the idea of *indivisibility* implicit in the word organic has been availed of by aesthetic theory, resilience — which is perhaps just as necessarily a mark of living things — has been so far ignored by the aesthetics of occurrent arts. This is, in my view, a new direction for aesthetical thinking.

The analysis that one finds in Kothari's essay relates to situations, and is surely of value. But aesthetic analysis, of which my explanation of resilience in Kathak may be taken as a small specimen, is rather deficient in the present volume. I expected to find a measure of it in the very first essay—'मन्दिरों में कथक'—by the late scholar Acharya K. C. D. Brahaspati. But the piece has little analysis, though it is quite informative. Thus (on p. 14) the distinguished author merely cites Mohammad Karam Imam's definition of *nritya* as "the carrying of bodily limbs to *sama* in accordance with the *tala* chosen" without caring to point out that this definition hardly provides for the requisite distinction be-

tween *nritya* and *nritya*. The well-known guru, S.M. Kalyanpurkar, is much more circumspect in this respect. Thus, he not only puts forward the traditional definition of *nritya*—*nrityam tālāyāshrayam*—but supplements it forthwith with the qualifying remark that, in spite of its emphasis on rhythm, *nritya* is yet a locus of some charm (or *rasa*) because of the graceful movement of limbs (p. 42). It is however his distinguished pupil, Rohini Bhate, who really impresses me with the subtle distinction that she draws between the *mukhivilas* (चेहरे का भाव) of a Bharatanatyam dancer and a Kathak guru (like Lacchu Maharaj) during the presentation of a *thata*. In the former case *mukhivilas*, appearing as a slender smile, is the index of a conscious relish of appropriate *angasanchalan*; in the latter, it is the reflex of an introverted look. I find it difficult to accept the essayist's suggestion that the Kathak here tends to reinforce his religious belief (that he is a part of God) with a conscious desire to experience the rhythm and motion that permeate the universe (pp. 48–49). But it is unquestionable that where a *thata* is well done the dancer appears to contemplate the serenely flowing form of *laya* and accordant bodily movement, and not merely to present a number in copybook fashion. There are some other mentionable features too in Rohini Bhate's essay entitled 'अभिनय और प्रयोग'. The more important of these are her explanation of how the very paucity of *natyadharami mudras* in Kathak is an invitation to the dancer for deeper involvement in *abhinaya* (p. 50); her emphasis on *arthabhava* (p. 51); and an impressive closing section on *prayog* (pp. 53–56). The article ends with the quite proper reminder that the dancer's rapport with the audience, which the Kathak can secure (we may say) with distinctive ease, is (in principle) a sharing of aesthetic delight, and not of the tumult that may be evoked by the interplay of hectic dancing and the reflex responses of excited lay onlookers

(p. 56).

Maya Rao's essay 'हस्तक' is of basic value, and may well be made compulsory reading for students of Kathak. It opens with the welcome emphasis that in this dance form the whole body may be regarded as the primary expressive medium; provides the amazing information that an ancient work lists as many as 360 gats; and rightly ends with a plea for the proper study and classification of *hastas* and also for their incorporation in the regular teaching of Kathak.

Ramnarayan Agrawala's essay on Kathak and Ras lists and explains some good linkages and differences between the two dance forms (pp. 20–21, 21–23); and rightly complains that since independence Ras has not received any encouragement at all. The editor's own preface and historical account of Kathak (pp. 24–38) are both competent pieces of writing. She is obviously right in saying that representation of the gaits of *navikas* of different kinds is a distinctive feature of Kathak (p. 35); and in explaining that part of the reason why Kathak is said to be deficient in expressiveness (भावप्रक्ष) is the large size of audiences today, which prevents the subtler details of *abhinaya* from being registered. Sunil Kothari's accounts of Lucknow and Jaipur *gharanas* (pp. 81–91, 131–141) are more comprehensive and better documented than similar attempts by me and Mohan Khokar in the *Marg* special issue on Kathak in 1959. Prof. S.K. Chaubey's essay on Pandit Acchan Maharaj is likeable, though brief. The maestro, I recall, was indeed a bit too insistent in calling himself नाचक (p. 97); but where he is praised for his surpassing nimbleness in passages of beauty (p. 98) and *tatkar* (pp. 99–100), it could well have been added that the dancing of this consummate artist was in either case distinguished by a पदचप so adroitly controlled that it never seemed to jar on the *rasika's* ear. Of the two *aesthetical* essays on the Jaipur *gharana*, one by Rohini Bhate and

the other by Puru Dadheech, the latter is clearly more substantial. Kalyanpurkar's essay on Pandit Sunder Prasad is not only authentic, but has added to my knowledge. I had been quite close to Panditji since 1958, but I never knew that he was the creator of the following *gats*: विष्णु गत (p. 165), भस्मासुर मोहिनी गत, अहल्या-उद्धार गत, and काम दहन गत (p. 166). The close of the volume is provided by Pramod Verma's brief essay 'रायगढ़ में कथक'. It rightly emphasizes the signal contribution of Raja Chakradhar Singh to the preservation and growth of Kathak, and points out an important feature of this dance form which is sadly neglected today: the possibility it affords of serene dance-passages at *ati-vilambit laya*.

The book does not provide enough material on the impressive amount of innovative work in Kathak done in the last few years. An essay on this topic would have made it more comprehensive. On the whole, however, *Kathak Prasang* is a welcome addition to our sparse literature on Kathak. It is neatly printed and reasonably priced. It is sure to interest *rasikas* and laymen alike.

S.K. SAXENA

Traditional Performing Arts: Potentials for Scientific Temper

Varsha Das

Wiley Eastern Limited, Delhi, 1992
161 pages, Rs 150

This is less an interesting than a painstaking enquiry into the performing arts, traditional and modern, that are most likely to bring about change among our rural people in developing rational attitudes and practices in the daily business of living. The accent throughout is on developing a scientific temper—the easy communication of scientific knowledge through local talent that can be identified and used as instruments of change. This may seem relatively



easy, since the folk and popular arts are still alive in India. In fact, it is not so easy because of the inherent obstacles to change that habitually exist in old societies.

Varsha Das has the merit of clarity—she is unambiguously clear—and this tends at times to make her writing rather pedestrian for the sophisticated reader. But perhaps the sophisticated are not really her target. She may be writing specifically for workers, actual and potential in the field, and for them her knowledge—supported by experiments in various parts of India, South-east and West Asia—may well be useful.

The book is prefaced by a relevant introduction that explains its author's main concerns. It consists of eight chapters, of which the sixth and seventh are especially valuable because they deal with experiments made and evaluated. The book considers communication channels; socio-cultural areas of concern; a historical perspective of communication and tradi-

tion; the role of tradition and folk media; a review of various art forms—there are 84 listed in different parts of India; selected experiments in folk and popular forms for development; an experiment with Bhavai in Gujarat; and a conclusion that assesses the efficiency and limitations of the means used to promote development. I cannot say that any part of this survey is so fundamental as to be indispensable reading for intelligent workers—in the field, but much of it needs to be said and repeated for the benefit of the average worker—it is so plainly commonsensical and time-saving.

The author has made up her mind about the general inadequacy of modern electronic media in dealing with her specific problem. On cinema, for instance, she says:

Since cinema is capable of impairing the society and since its technology is in the hands of those rich producers who have taken up this medium only as a commercially viable business, its use as a change-agent for better life remains doubtful.

She adds:

Cinema can certainly help to change values and attitudes provided the whole industry decides to fix its role for a specific purpose.

One would not doubt that the ordinary Bombay talkie is not merely inadequate, but uninterested in effecting the sort of change that Varsha Das has in mind. These films are blatantly escapist—they are intended to provide the sort of entertainment that the depressed seek in order to get away from their stultifying environment. But parallel (small) cinema, including some of the films of such directors as Shyam Benegal—remember *Manthan*?—are likely to be good agents of change. There is no need for the whole cinema industry to pledge itself to promoting a scientific temper—Heaven forbid! It is surely enough if some film directors can be persuaded to include this among their purposes in film-making.

Varsha Das is also critical of television, and here she has the advantage of direct experience. She cites Doordarshan Bombay's Gyandeeep Mandals or Lamps-of-Knowledge clubs in Maharashtra. By August 1987, in 800 centres of non-formal adult education, programmes had been tried out. The clubs selected a problem and got their members to enact it in the form of a play. Members discussed solutions and follow-up action was taken on television. Socio-economic drama has been used all over the world with varying results. What was the Maharashtrian club experience? Thirty-nine lessons, each of 20 minutes' duration, were shown twice a week. A hundred viewing clubs in a textile area with 24 federations were used, with Gyandeeep Mandal Mahasangha as an apex body. The author's conclusions can hardly be disputed, but they are spelt out to the point of naivete. She says that the success of the Gyandeeep Mandals depends on the full involvement of the clubs; that electronic media have to be connected with grassroot-level problems; that the programmes call for special training—that several "youngsters" have been smart but ineffective because, with them, content and presentation have seldom been connected with the audience for which the programme is intended. The new systems, she argues, compete for mastery with each other. She concludes that it is not just hardware we need, but software, and all that goes into preparing software to bring about change in behavioural patterns.

Her second chapter makes the important point that village and urban societies differ in this fundamental: that village life lies in communication and leaders there are valued for personal qualities; whereas urban societies choose leaders not on personal grounds but for their rank in a socio-political hierarchy. Also, village societies tend to adhere to the familiar and have to be persuaded not to resist the unfamiliar. Urban societies are relatively ready for change. In the village, supersti-

tions abound, that have to be demonstrated to be worthless. All this takes time. We are 'introduced' to what we have known for the last three decades, namely Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization that rejects prescriptive teaching and replaces it by liberating education, in which learners are not objects, but subjects who act on the world and change it.

Chapters 4 and 5 are varied and useful for workers in the field: they list methods and forms of traditional media that still exist in India. To the common reader, however, these chapters are attractive mainly for the charming line-drawings that illustrate them, executed by Kalpana Mohanty Rai and Jay Compusoft. The book grows more interesting as it deals with eurythmy, "originated at the turn of the century by Rudolf Steiner". More specifically, it analyzes the contributions made by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and Prithviraj Kapoor, who was bent on communicating socio-economic messages, as well as more modern experiments like street theatre. Das stresses the importance of the manipulator, who becomes an effective agent for change only if he/she is "sensitive, innovative and idealistic".

Perhaps the most important chapter in the book is the one that deals with the Gujarat Bhavai experiment. One of the themes taken up here was the eclipse of the sun and its connection with the food habits of a given area. Superstitions were analyzed; people were made to consider the

wisdom of not cooking food and not storing water during an eclipse. Why, it was asked, should women fast at such times? Was there any special value in prayer and worship during these occasions? Was it sensible to distribute charity to Brahmins? All this was enacted. The mythological background once established, a young girl would enter and ask searching questions that unfolded the scientific reason behind the phenomenon of the eclipse. Ignorant people, it was indicated, tended to continue traditions unthinkingly, and charity to Brahmins meant only filling "the pockets of cheats". Audience response was tested. Das holds that the performers must play the role convincingly as agents of change. Also, that to be judged fairly the method has to be tried out over a substantial period of time. She concludes that in developing a scientific theme in the rural areas, we must be pragmatic, combining folk and traditional media with electronic expertise.

This is hardly a startling conclusion, but the assemblage of material within a single volume for those interested in this aspect of adult education is undoubtedly useful. One does not doubt Varsha Das's seriousness of purpose or her objectivity. The range of information she supplies on traditional media is wide and will strengthen field workers for the strenuous work that lies ahead of them.

MURIEL WASI